

Harrison County Family Drug Court addresses addiction that divides parents and children

March 11, 2016

Harrison County Youth Court recently added a Family Drug Court to assist parents whose drug problems have resulted in their children being taken into the custody of the Department of Human Services or being involved in proceedings with DHS and the Youth Court.

The program provides counseling for parents in an effort to avoid placement of their children in foster care. When removal of children is unavoidable, the program works to help the parents resolve their drug problems so that families can be reunited.

Nine parents of 17 children are currently enrolled in the program, which started in late February.

Youth Court Judge Margaret Alfonso and Court Administrator Cindy Alexander created the program.

Judge Alfonso said, "The purpose of Family Drug Court is to provide services to families who cannot get those services otherwise for substance abuse issues." Those families were unable to afford private treatment. The program employs a therapist who works with families.

"Economic barriers are significant," Judge Alfonso said. "Many families simply do not have the money to pay for drug treatment, do not have the insurance to pay for drug treatment, and most do not have Medicaid. We are trying to fill in that gap through our therapist."

"They are getting therapy, encouragement and one-on-one attention," Judge Alfonso said. "It's really been productive."

Judge Alfonso also supervises the Harrison County Juvenile Drug Court, which began accepting participants shortly after she took the Youth Court and County Court bench in January 2011. Family Drug Court and Juvenile Drug Court are separate and distinct.

"Juvenile Drug Court is for children who have substance abuse issues," Judge Alfonso said. Participants are juveniles who have been charged with delinquent acts. The Juvenile Drug Court addresses the children's substance abuse problems.

"The reason we got so interested in having a Family Drug Court is that we saw the success of Juvenile Drug Court, and then we saw such a need for a population that is not otherwise able to obtain services," Judge Alfonso said.

However, the family program has limitations. "For some, their drug use is so severe that they need detox," Judge Alfonso said. "We do not offer that through our Family Drug Court. We can refer them to a hospital. But they are faced with the barrier of how do they pay for it."

The Harrison County Family Drug Court is the third of its kind in the state. Adams and Rankin County Youth Courts have operated pilot programs since 2010.

The Adams and Rankin County programs address drug and alcohol problems that are the underlying causes of abuse and neglect, delinquency, domestic strife, crime and a host of other problems. The family drug courts deal with juveniles, parents and their extended families in efforts to address substance abuse without separating children from their families.

The Harrison County Family Drug Court is funded by the Administrative Office of Courts. AOC will reimburse up to \$65,000 in Family Drug Court expenses during the fiscal year which ends June 30, 2016. The Juvenile Drug Court's budget is \$125,000.

State Drug Court Coordinator Joey Craft said, "The AOC applauds Judge Alfonso's efforts to implement a family drug court program in Harrison County. Children are often victims of circumstances they cannot control and too many times, they have to be removed from the home when the circumstances have to do with addiction and substance abuse by the parents. Whenever we can help parents by treating their addiction..., it's a win for everyone involved."

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